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Devi, Sushila

Mahatma Gandhi's  
influence on Hindu women

[S.I.]

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# **Mahatma Gandhi's Influence on Hindu Women**

*By*  
**Madame Sushila Devi**

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Sept 1947



Oct. 8, 1924

## Mahatma Gandhi's Influence on Hindu Women

If the American public were better acquainted with the general facts regarding India, it would doubtless be surprised, and deeply impressed with the seething activities of the National Movement. The "unchanging East" has certainly changed. And it is as certainly changing rapidly and beyond conception. Yes, India is now awake and progress is the order of the day. From the East to the West of India, the air resounds with the chorus of advancement. No less do echoes boom with the mandate, from the North to the Southern portion, "Stand! Stand, on your feet and advance!" The air being surcharged with the buoyant life of freedom, each individual thinks, and very rightly too, that he has every right to advance, and better his condition.

In these jarring times, you will find the men astir, moving heaven and earth to gain their demands of liberty according to constitutional lines. And not alone has the "tiresome educated class" proved troublesome and shown itself pushing to gain India's freedom, but even the so-called "inert masses" of India, and the humblest of the humble, are clamouring for their rights. They believe that if anyone can add an extra mouthful towards their lank, ill-fed children, if anyone can solve their intricate problem, it is certainly Mahatma Gandhi, the saint sent by Heaven to remove their ills and to cure the chronic poverty of India. Thus, the "inert mass" besieged the train which happened to carry the Mahatma to and fro, in order to tender their appeals as well as to have his blessing. In reverence, with bowed heads, they listened to his benediction—a benediction which was repeatedly given to both the great and the humble. "Sisters! Brothers!" exhorted he, "Live in peace—in love. Do to one another as you would they should act by you. 'Patriotism based on love giveth life'; so, grant the neglected—the down-trodden the same freedom we claim, nay demand for our-

selves. In Unity—in Hindu Moslem Unity—lies our strength, our freedom! Go! Spin and weave. Therein lies your wealth! Keep the silver fast within your homes, within your country. Thus, alone will fields of green spread around, and plenty smile!"

And whilst the air resounds with the chorus of advancement from both the "educated," and the "inert mass," do you think, my American sisters, that the women of India nod and slumber? Do you think that they are so engrossed in their pots and pans, or rocking cradles, that they are indifferent to the momentous events and changes that are passing before their very eyes? Indeed, like men, women have, happily, been affected by the spirit of the day. True, most of them are illiterate and notwithstanding the "benign administration" of the British, under which India has slept since the past 150 years, the education of women has been stinted and not more than three or four per cent have been given the privilege of even the three R's. Yet the Martial Law of 1919 in the Punjab caused a general upheaval, a united stir, and has gone far to open their deluded eyes to their precarious situation in life. Awakened! Wondrously awakened, they are marching along hand in hand with their husbands, their brothers and their sons in the National Movement. Yes, Mahatma Gandhi's presence has simply electrified them. He has aroused them from their lethargy and transformed them into women of action.

You will, therefore, find that not only the educated women are determined to go through the fire of life in order to further the progress of their Motherland, but even the illiterate are imbued with a spirit of patriotism to serve their country. Indeed, you will find, that as women in days gone by, worked hand in hand with their brothers to better the condition of their homes, or to defend their country, so even at the present time, women take part in all progressive activities for the welfare of their Motherland—India.

Years ago, before the rich Province of the Punjab, situated in the north of India, fell into the hands of the British, by the help of Sikh arms, the Patiala State was powerful, and is even now a recognized power. At one time, one of its kings was an imbecile, so that his elder sister helped in the administration of the State. The Maharattas, who inhabited portions of the west of India, were over-running the Punjab, when to check their encroachment into Patiala, the Princess,

with a body of men, met them in open field, and fought till evening closed in. The band of Sikh soldiers was weary from the hard fight and somewhat discouraged by defeat. The elders, therefore, advised the Princess to return to Patiala and gather a larger force for defence. She spoke no word, but with tightened lips slipped off her fine charger. "Ho warriors! cast away your swords," exclaimed she with flashing eyes, "and take—take in exchange my silken skirt. Never—no never shall the daughter of a Sikh, the lion-hearted, turn her back to a foe!" Then proudly walking among her loved men, she tended the wounded and bound their wounds with strips of her soft veil. Next morning, before the sky was streaked with a golden hue, the lion-hearted warriors had fought desperately and dispersed the Maharatta army across the country.

The Sikh women of the Punjab are of the same clan and many as countless as the Princess of Patiala. Their blood courses with the same dash and daring, and above all they are loyal to the core. Since time immemorial, a king has been regarded by the Hindus as the father of his subjects—a father just, a father wise to study the interest of his people, hence he is called "Mai-hap, the father and mother" of his people, whilst, on the other hand, the subject considers it his duty, and an honour to stake his all, even his life, in the defence of his sovereign and his country.

I have already remarked that the majority of Indian women are illiterate. Their opinion is, therefore, generally formed, not from the views of the newspapers or from the thoughtful reading of books, but, from what is rumoured abroad, or whatever happens to come superficially into their own experience, so that the apparently peaceful, balmy days under the British flag, have gone far to win their hearts; whilst, the railways running hither and thither, and making pilgrimage rapid and easy, are luxuries beyond description. So, many a woman blesses the British Rule, even respectfully terming it "Mai-hap, my very father and mother"; and showers blessings, "raj bana rahe—may England's reign be long!" for the halcyon days she is enjoying under its protection. But particularly are the women grateful for the spread of education, even though it is sparingly given. And more so are the Hindu widows, who, qualifying themselves as teachers, derive a sufficient sum for their simple wants. The Hindus are a gen-

tle race, and easily affected by kindness shown to them. Many a heart has an Inspectress of Schools won by giving scholarships to widows to further their studies, or evincing special interest in their girls.

Thus, when the late European War broke out, the sympathy, the loyalty which the Punjaub women and others all over India manifested, was not only heartfelt, but the humblest woman set about to render some service to her Emperor, who was sorely beset by a dangerous rival. And in time, when it became known to them that war was being waged between the two royal cousins—the late Emperor of Germany, and their own British Emperor—they felt they were experiencing in their life time a war similar to the great war of India, in which the royal cousins, the wicked Kauravas and the righteous Pandavas, had fought over a kingdom in ancient India. But what evoked the deepest interest, and increased their admiration was that England was making an honourable stand for justice and truth at the sacrifice of her life. Indeed, so intense did their interest in the European War become that no sacrifice on their part seemed too great, so long as it brought success to their Emperor.

Night and day the European War was discussed among them, so much so that at times boys and girls enacted it, when the skirmish usually ended in the overthrow of the Germans, amidst lusty acclamations from young throats "Victory! Victory to the English, great as our Pandavas. They ever abide by truth!" Thus, from village to village, city to city, all life was astir. One man vied with another in the collection of money, or in procuring goods and man-power; whilst the busy trains carried away bales of eatables and woollen "comforts," with the blessings of the loyal mothers and wives. Yes, at the call of duty, the women of Punjaub in particular encouraged their men to enroll under the English banner.

In schools, both teachers and girls kept themselves busy with the making of "comforts" for the Front; whilst many a teacher—chiefly widows—spent their hard earnings over special prayers for victory to their Emperor. Bathing before sunrise and fasting many of them would walk long distances to some special Temple noted for "prayers being answered." Placing small baskets of sweets near the altar, they would with joined hands plead, "Father of the Universe, Thy ears reach far; Thy heart is larger. Give ear to the prayers of Thy

humble supplicants. Turn—O turn the tide, and crown the Allies with Victory!"

Since the past 17 years I have privately been running an Industrial School for the benefit of Hindu widows, who should be educated, not only to benefit themselves, but to be useful to others as well. At times, some widows attended the morning class quite late, and when questioned, one of them invariably answered, "My patron, Guru Govind Singh, detained me. I was pleading with my Saint for my putr—my son," meaning in due deference the King of England, and she was a widow, bent with age; yet with the help of her staff and joyously ejaculating "Jai! Jai! Victory Victory!" she would, of a morning, do a mile or more to seek the favour of her patron for England. The unbounding sense of loyalty which the Indian women showed was nothing surprising. At the same time the Germans who were attacking single-handed the Allied forces, held their admiration as well. The Sikhs have been warriors for generations, and to hold life cheap in acts of daring elicits a chorus of praise. "Sisters!" remarked one, "the Germans are brilliant men to fight single-handed and face an Allied force. Yes, just like our warriors who slashed right and left, even when their heads were struck off"; and they would fall to recounting by-gone days of valour among their own kith and kin.

Whilst the women were busy in their own way, the moving spirit of the Punjaub was the British Administrator. His movements were meteor-like. Smiling and all-gracious, he journeyed from city to city, puffing up the pride of the people with enthusiastic speeches, and thanking them for their wondrous co-operation in the collection of money, of materials and of recruits. Referring to the gallant deeds of the 14th Sikhs at Gallipoli, he stated at an assembly, "They died a glorious death, but the memory survives as a splendid illustration of Sikh tenacity and Sikh heroism." Yes, it was the Administrator's voice, that echoing forth in the stately mansion of the great, and in the humble cottage of the peasant, influenced the people to make noble sacrifices. His was the guiding hand that drew forth money and men—men to such an extent that out of the whole of India, the Punjaub mustered the greatest number. In the statistics, it will be found that a Brahman family actually enlisted six of his sons, a Mohammedan three, whilst a widow added her mite, consisting of two sons, and when one was wounded, made good the deficit, by enrolling her re-

maining son. "Be true to your salt," encouraged the widow, as she clasped him to her heaving bosom. "Should you lose your head for your Emperor, doubt not you will obtain the celestial crown."

Thus, the women in loyalty and good faith gave their youths in the service of Great Britain. Even Lord Curzon who invariably sees the golden East through a darkened glass, makes the significant remark in his introduction to the Indian Corps in France, "The Indian Expeditionary Force," writes he, "arrived in the nick of time. That it helped to save the cause, both of the Allies and of civilization has been openly acknowledged by the highest in the land, from the sovereign downward. The nature and value of that service can never be forgotten." Alas! how soon the services rendered in foreign parts were clean swept out from the memory of the worthy officials of the Punjab, the bleeding garden of Amritsar, where the innocent merry-makers of the Spring Festival were mowed down by machine guns, stands as a witness!

The Ram Lila is an ancient Festival observed year after year, and it usually falls in the month of November. It commemorates the glorious victory of our much loved and revered Rama who after slaying his enemy Ravan, king of Ceylon, is welcomed back to his kingdom, Ayodaya. The Festival lasts ten days, when portions of the sacred epic, the Ramayana, relating to the adventures of Rama, is dramatized or daily chanted; whilst the last scene terminates with the grotesque effigies of the ten-headed Ravan, and his host being set on fire, amidst the shouts of the gathered throng, "Praise be to Rama! The just ever succeed!"

It was during these festive days that the Armistice in Europe was declared. The long expected news spread like wild fire, removing the weight of anxiety from burdened minds; whilst the women with gladsome faces, and light steps flew from house to house, exclaiming, "Sisters! we predicted success all along! Lo! our Patron, Guru Govind Singh, has turned the wheel of fortune, and crowned the English with success. O yes, the just ever prosper!" And amidst these rejoicings the poor were fed, whilst hundreds of garlands were offered at various shrines mingled with a thanksgiving.

Now, that the great tension of the War was over, the women

worked themselves up to fever heat over the coming expectations—hoping something great and wonderful for their loyalty and self-sacrifice. The daily theme of their chit-chat became, "How? In what manner will the British lighten our burden?" "Don't you remember, sisters," remarked an intelligent one, "how gracious Rama was to his subjects. In fact, as he flew in his beman—Aerial Car—from Ceylon across to his kingdom, garlands were dropped all along the route to enrich the homes and fields of his subjects. Our Emperor, George of England, is as large-hearted, and our barns will be filled with good things."

And whilst they surmised, whilst they watched and waited for something good to gladden their hearts, there appeared a star—an ominous star! Not in the heavens, but overshadowing the homes of the people, in the shape of the Rowlett Act, a repressive measure, enacted by the government. Great was the agitation, deep the resentment felt against the repressive measure being imposed on them, after the loyalty manifested towards the English. The Indian members of the Legislative Council opposed it vehemently, so much so that some even resigned their membership in protest; whilst later on Dr. Rabindro Nath Tagore, whose poems you well appreciate, sent a letter addressed to the Viceroy of India, asking "to be relieved of his knighthood, as he desired to take his stand, shorn of all distinction, by the side of his countrymen, who were made to suffer a degradation not fit for human beings, and to take the consequences in giving voice to the protest of the millions surprised in a dumb anguish of terror, by methods of administration, without parallel in the history of civilized nations, an account of which has trickled through the gagged silence reaching every corner in India."

Yes, in bitterness of heart the "educated class" cried "Shame! Shame!" to the injustice meted out to India. This class of Hindus had ever been an eyesore to the British Administrator of the Punjab, and he was maddened to think that his views should be opposed by a "frothy set." The fact that the Punjab people, whom he had lauded, had been "brother comrades" on the memorable battlefield, and sacrificed their lives in England's defence, was clean gone from his memory. One thought, one alone, possessed him, and that was not to miss the golden opportunity, before his departure from India,

and to strike while the iron was hot. So, forthwith the Martial Law in the Punjab was enforced to humiliate, to crush the spirit of the "tall-talkers!"

Suddenly darkness enveloped the Punjab, and filled with terror and consternation, the women barred their doors. In anguish they wrung their hands at the turn events had taken, crying, "Can it be possible that in our dear land which has been specially acclaimed by the British Administrator of the Punjab for its loyalty and good services, open rebellion has crept up? No never! Or is it possible that the smiles of the Rulers have turned into frowns, now that victory has been gained, and the services of the men are no longer needed? Impossible!" But as they peeped from their windows, and their eyes fell on mutilated bodies of the young and the old, caused by bombs thrown from aeroplanes, wails rent the air. The moaning and the lamentations about the streets were terrible, and the echo of "Alas! alas!" with the "thud! thud," beating of the breast, until the very blood oozed out, was ceaseless for days together.

"Sisters!" exclaimed one of the elders among them, "our deeds have angered Heaven! Perhaps—perhaps we were too hasty—too ready, to send our youths across the seas!" "True! True!" seconded another, "God—God has turned his face from us, for throwing away our pearls—pearls of sons! Oh! my heart is withered," and the "thud! thud!"—beating of the breast continued with full force. "Alas! Alas!" broke in a number of sobbing voices, "we fools, have built the homes of others, alas!—to ruin our huts. Oh! we are widowed—our helpless babes are orphaned. But the bombs, the blessed bombs have opened our deluded eyes. Yes, the machine guns have brought us to our senses to hedge in our own homes first and foremost."

Yes, the Martial Law of 1919 went far to awaken the women of the Punjab to the fact that they had been depleted of their gems, gems of sons. Indeed, the "educated" and the "inert mass" felt in all bitterness that they were regarded by the Mighty in arms as tools, mere instruments, to strengthen the homes of others, whilst they were of no more consequence than blades of grass, to be mown down or trampled under foot, when emergencies were over. Ominous, indeed, was the wrath of the people against the repressive Rowlett Act, and the injustice meted out to the Punjab by the government. As for

the women, for weeks they lay stricken dumb and overwhelmed with anguish.

Fortunately, there was one voice that pacified them; one gentle hand that stemmed the storm of anger, and turned it into a different channel. Amidst the roll of murmurings and lamentations was heard the voice of Mahatma Gandhi, a voice to be remembered, for this saint is the most vital force in the National Movement. Preaching the ancient Hindu doctrine of non-violence, kill not, injure not, even the wrong-doer, he journeyed throughout India, strengthening the Hindu Moslem Unity, and gathering around him earnest co-workers. "Sisters! Brothers! Peace! Peace!" urged he with warmth. "Calm yourself and do no violence. Our rock of defence must be non-violence and godliness. Certainly, the bombs and machine guns have been a tremendous shock to our expectations, but, there is a greater force than those destructive weapons. It is Co-operation—the spiritual weapon. Let us adhere to weapons of Love—of Unity. Yes, let us, Hindus and Moslems, unite in brotherly love and rise to our full height. Patriotism based on Love giveth life. So Sisters! Brothers! set to work. We must learn to be self-reliant, and independent of others; and true success lies in action, spin and weave!"

Bombs had been heard of, but few women had realized the havoc, the agony they created, until before them lay the writhing bodies of the innocent. As for mowing down, with a machine gun, the men, women and children, out on a holiday, and armed with nothing more dangerous than umbrellas and sticks, it seemed to their sense of chivalry an act most heinous, most unmanly. "None may slay the unarmed," has been the honourable creed from time immemorial! Yes, fair fight the women of the martial race understand and will proudly bring out an old relic of their forefathers—a pen and ink sketch of some eminent warrior who had stood his ground and felled down his enemies right and left, even when his head had been struck off; but to strike the "unarmed," was western chivalry—not theirs and difficult to understand.

The widows stricken dumb from anguish moved about more like spectres than beings of flesh and blood. Fasting day by day, and following the terrible custom of beating the breast, in time of mourning, they would certainly have killed themselves by inches, but Ma-



hatma Gandhi's timely appearance among the bereaved restrained their heart-rending grief. As they surrounded him, he comforted them, whilst, in silence, he prayed that their bitterness; their anguish might be changed to love and peace. Seeing them calmer he gently remarked, "India has always rested on the dharma—on the loyalty and duty of faithful wives. To the call of the Emperor in the day of his need, you have made a splendid response—a sacrifice beyond example. Now your duty is to protect the honour of your country. Sisters! the honour of India is at stake, and it is your duty to live for your home, for your Motherland."

Screams and cries of "Alas! alas! In vain have we cast away our gems—gems of sons!" rent the air. Quieting the women again Mahatma Gandhi remonstrated, "Sisters! This is no time for tears and sighs! Every moment is precious and true success lies in action. Hearken! Throw off foreign tinsel, foreign splendour which has impoverished our Motherland, and caused her children to go ill-fed and naked. To work! to work, my sisters! Reverence the spinning-wheel, and make home-spun cloth. Thus, will you stave off the hungry wolf from your doors, and enrich your Motherland with the wealth which your vanity and selfishness yearly sends into foreign markets. Think—think, sisters, of all the wealth kept—retained in the palm of your own hands. Spin and weave and thus keep it all as a gift to your Motherland, who, with a bounteous hand, will make you a hundred fold return."

Like refreshing dew, the entreaties of the Mahatma fell on their ears, as they listened to him in silence and with great solemnity. It revived them, and up leaped the spirit of energy in their hearts. They replied in a chorus, "Truly the Saint speaks for our good. The War—the War alas! was our undoing. But the Mahatma guards our honour, and keeps the hungry wolf from our doors. To work! to work! Let us spin and weave."

When I sailed from India for Europe, this time last August, 1921, many were the vows taken, both by the educated and the illiterate women all over India to wear in future home-spun material. Some at once ordered home-spun underlinen; others made dresses, whilst a few made a conflagration of foreign goods, advising the crowd assembled to witness the bonfire, "You do the same, for the Mahatma

says it is tainted with disease and is ruinous to our homes. As we would not deliberately pass on cholera or the 'flu' to another, so we must not give these even to the poor. But by example teach them to wear home-spun material and thus saving money get two meals a day, instead of starving. Yes, yes, do as the Saint bids. He dwells nearer to God and is far-sighted."

Hundreds joining hands together reverently bowed, and kissing the earth murmured, "He dharti Mata—O Mother Earth! Forgive! Forgive! Our ignorance has wronged thee. Lovingly now we'll labour and not fail thee."

Morning, noon and night, the "whir, whir!" of the spinning-wheel began to be heard from home to home—from street to street. As the women joyously laboured, the chant of "Long life to Mahatma Gandhi! May all success go with the spinning-wheel!" resounded in all parts of India.

India awakened, India chastened by humiliation and sorrow, it is in the hands of the Hindu women, who, though illiterate, are a mighty force in the National Movement, to win the Economic Race slowly and surely as did the tortoise in his game with the hare.

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12 Beaufort House, Chelsea, England, September 9, 1921.

Colonel Wedgewood and his wife have met Mrs. Sushila Devi in India (Amritsar) and also in London; and, gladly bear testimony to the good work she has done and is doing, especially for the education of Indian women. Her writings are most helpful to her countrywomen.

They hope that all facilities will be given her in America to increase her knowledge and experience, that her sphere of usefulness may be still wider.

FLORENCE E. WEDGEWOOD,  
JOSIAH C. WEDGEWOOD,  
*Member of Parliament.*

NATIONAL AMERICAN WOMAN SUFFRAGE ASSOCIATION  
Branch of International Woman Suffrage Alliance and of  
National Council of Women

MRS. CARRIE CHAPMAN CATT, *President*  
National Headquarters, 171 Madison Avenue

New York, March 17, 1922.

MESSRS. ELLISON AND WHITE,  
Chautauqua,  
New York City, N. Y.

DEAR SIRS:

Permit me to present Madame Sushila Devi from Lahore, India. She has been educated in England and speaks excellent English. She is well poised, clear in expression and impressive in her public speaking. She is anxious to have opportunity to tell the public about India and especially the work being done there to improve conditions.

I hope you will have a good talk with her and if possible give her a chance to be heard.

Yours very truly,

CARRIE CHAPMAN CATT, *President*.

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